

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on December 7, 2010,  
the following tribute to the life and service of the late Karl Van Duyn  
Teeter was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

## **KARL VAN DUYN TEETER**

BORN: March 2, 1929

DIED: April 20, 2007

Karl Teeter did not, in his youth, show many signs of being headed for an academic career. Both his parents were highly educated; his mother, after giving birth to Karl and five younger children, eventually went on to found the Department of Philosophy at what is now the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth. But young Karl, growing up in Lexington, Massachusetts, was unfocused and, by his own testimony, lazy. Leaving high school for college at the age of fifteen, he dropped out without a degree two years later. For the next five years he accumulated what we would now call “life experience,” trying his hand at a number of jobs for stints of about six months each. None led anywhere he wanted to go.

The year 1951 brought two events that changed Karl’s life. The first was marrying Anita Bonacorsi (Radcliffe ’51), the strong and generous-hearted woman who became his life companion. The second was joining the United States Army and being sent to a desk job in Japan. He and Anita lived off-base, in rooms rented from a Japanese family. Karl started learning Japanese, and one day picked up a popular book, *The Loom of Language* by Frederick Bodmer, which entertainingly told about the ways languages could differ and the ways they were all basically the same—in a word, linguistics. This was Karl’s first exposure to his future field, and it attracted him immediately. On completing his tour of duty in 1954, he went back to college as an undergraduate at the University of California, Berkeley, then the leading school for linguistics on the West Coast. Berkeley remained the Teeters’ home for the next five years. In 1956, after finishing a quick B.A. in Oriental Languages, Karl officially entered the doctoral program in linguistics.

Karl’s chief mentor at Berkeley was the charismatic Professor Mary Haas, who had been a student of the great anthropologist and linguist Edward Sapir. Mary directed the Survey of California Indian Languages, which, among other things, supported graduate students doing fieldwork on the state’s very numerous indigenous languages, all of them endangered. Karl was assigned to work on Wiyot, the language of a small tribe in the far north of California, near modern Eureka. It was to be a lifelong association. Wiyot was known to be

related to its close geographical neighbor Yurok; the two constituted a family called Ritwan. But this tiny group was related to nothing else in California or anywhere west of the Rockies. In 1913 Sapir had suggested that Ritwan might be distantly related to Algonquian, the vast family of languages that once covered the East Coast, the Upper Midwest, and the northern plains of the United States and Canada. Special interest thus attached to Wiyot—an interest heightened by the fact that the language was about to become extinct. Karl's informant, Mrs. Della Prince, was the last fully competent native speaker of Wiyot. She died in 1962, the year in which Karl submitted his dissertation, "The Wiyot Language."

By then, a great deal else had happened. The late fifties were a period of ferment in American linguistics, as the theoretical underpinnings of the field, rarely questioned in the structuralist-dominated postwar period, came under sharp attack in the early writings of Noam Chomsky. Unusually for a Berkeley-style field linguist, Karl was keenly interested in linguistic theory—a fact that probably contributed to his election to the Society of Fellows in 1959. When Karl, Anita, and their two little girls came east from California that year, the move proved to be permanent. The Junior Fellowship was followed by a regular faculty position at Harvard in 1962, with tenure in 1966. The family reached full strength with the birth of two more girls, twins, in 1960.

Karl's work on Wiyot played a major role in resolving the so-called Ritwan controversy; the "Algic" family, consisting of Ritwan and Algonquian, is now considered a classic case of a distant, but proved, genetic relationship. Meanwhile, with fieldwork on Wiyot no longer possible, Karl began to work on Maliseet-Passamaquoddy, an Algonquian language with speakers in Maine and New Brunswick. For a quarter of a century, from 1963 to 1989, he accumulated field notes and tapes from his numerous summer trips to New Brunswick and occasional work with Maliseet speakers in Cambridge and elsewhere. The Maliseet speakers he worked with included the notable cultural authority and raconteur Peter Lewis Paul, in whose memory Karl edited an affectionate retrospective in 1993. Some of the texts Karl collected from Peter Paul were published in 2007 by his former student Philip LeSourd; a great deal of other material remains unpublished.

The courses Karl taught at Harvard reflected his interests. Two of his regular offerings were Linguistic Field Methods (Linguistics 117) and Theory and Method of Linguistics (Linguistics 210), the latter taken by three of the authors of the present minute. He had outstanding students, some of whom followed him into Algonquian and North American linguistics. Yet a full teaching schedule was not compatible with the special needs of a field linguist whom fate had made the custodian of the last first-hand records of a vanished language. Although the published version of "The Wiyot Language" had come out in 1964, much else remained in drawers and notebooks that needed extensive processing before their contents could see the light of day. In 1989, therefore, exactly thirty years after his arrival at Harvard as a Junior Fellow, Karl took early retirement and began to devote his academic energies wholly to preparing his Wiyot materials for publication. There were soon results:

the two-volume *Wiyot Handbook*, written with the collaboration of his former student John D. Nichols, appeared in 1993. Years later, when an effort was launched to revive Wiyot as a spoken language, Karl, a generous supporter of all language revitalization efforts, made his notes and tapes available to the tribe.

Karl was deeply attached to Harvard, and especially to the Society of Fellows, where he had spent three of the happiest years of his life; yet his unpretentious personal style and reflexive sympathy for the underdog—qualities shared by his whole family—made him unwilling to conform to the stereotype of a Harvard professor. During his teaching years, a guest at the famously warm and welcoming Teeter household at 16½ Woodbridge Street might have found Karl wearing a politically impertinent T-shirt, proffering a homemade wine or home-brewed beer. Later in life, too, he resisted typecasting. “I used to be a professor,” he wrote in the mid-nineties, “but am now a half-time research scholar and half-time grandfather. It is a lucky and enjoyable life I lead.” And so it was, coming to an end only when he suffered a fatal heart attack on April 20, 2007. He was survived by Anita, his wife of 55 years, who passed away in June 2009; by his four daughters, twelve grandchildren, one great-grandchild, and seven step-great-grandchildren; and by numerous colleagues and students. All will miss a unique figure in the Harvard community.

Respectfully submitted,

Ives Goddard  
Susumu Kuno  
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